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ABSTRACT

This study examines the outcomes for teachers and the benefits reaped from a Connecticut beginning teacher induction program. Data were sought to determine whether the Connecticut State Department of Education's intent to improve the quality and value of first-year teaching through intensive, ongoing support by a mentor was being met. The method of research was to look directly to mentors and beginning teachers to obtain their perceptions of program benefits. Data sources included telephone surveys, focus group discussions, and site visit interviews. The results of the Connecticut induction program study would indicate that the quality and value of first-year teaching in the state has improved as a result of intensive, ongoing support of beginning teachers by mentors. Conclusions are based on first-hand evidence from novices who believe they benefit from the assistance of trained mentors. Equally important, there is evidence that the quality of teaching by mentors has improved. Some areas for further study include: how one's commitment to teaching is influenced by participation in a mentoring program, and what impact a mentoring program has on students. Charts of telephone survey results and copies of positive, personal statements written by mentors to future mentors are included. (LL)

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THE BENEFITS OF AN INDUCTION PROGRAM:

WHAT DO MENTORS AND NOVICES SAY?

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THE BENEFITS OF AN INDUCTION PROGRAM

Connecticut's commitment to this induction process is extensive, as has been elaborated on in the talks you have just heard. The philosophy, the planning, the players, the practice and teacher documentation have been detailed by the previous speakers.

What, then, are the outcomes for teachers? What benefits has this induction program reaped? What are the payoffs?

Research indicates that systematic and structured induction programs in any profession have resulted in career commitment and competence of novices to a greater extent than where induction processes are casual, spontaneous or completely absent.

The literature shows that, in teaching, systematic induction of new teachers leads to "professionalization of teaching." (Schlectly and Whitford, 1989)In addition, when formal mentoring occurs, positive reenforcement, guidance and moral support are benefits for beginners. (Huffman and Leak,1985)

Further benefits have been cited: demonstration of improved teaching skills and progress in teaching during the induction period when mentors have been matched with novices. (Warren-Little,1985)

Veteran teachers serving as mentors benefit, too. Mentors' teaching skills, professional growth, recognition and reward have all been positively affected by their work with novices. (Allen, 1989)

In determining outcomes of Connecticut's induction plan, we sought data that would indicate the extent to which a fundamental intent of the Connecticut State Department of Education had been fulfilled. That intent: "...to improve the quality and value of first-year teaching through intensive, ongoing support by the mentor."

Our research approach differs, I believe, from most other methodologies in the field: we looked directly to mentors and beginning teachers to obtain their perceptions of program benefits. We have anecdotally rich material from several data sources to draw from: 1) telephone surveys; 2) focus group discussions; 3)site visit interviews; and 4)letters from practicing mentors to teachers contemplating becoming mentors.

What we found were patterns in experience and feeling. Trends. The data echo each other regarding benefits. That is, what respondents told telephone interviewers, they also told their colleagues and facilitators in focus groups and field staff workers at site visits.

What did we find? (See attached tables for illustration.)

Let's start by looking at some statistics about the values of mentoring perceived by 205 novices, as communicated in responses to telephone surveys. Six questions pertaining to the benefits of having mentors were asked. The first two figures we will look at are based on broad, general questions posed to novices:

One question asked novices in the spring of their first year of teaching was, "Has the mentor made a real difference in your becoming a more competent teacher?" Eighty-five percent (85%) agreed strongly or somewhat that the mentor had made a real difference.

A subsequent question asked of novices was, "Has your mentor made a real difference in your adjustment to teaching?" Seventy-nine percent (79%) agreed that the mentor had made a real difference.

A more specific question elicited a response about the nature of the assistance provided by mentors: 85% of the novices interviewed agreed

that "My mentor provided me with clear, constructive feedback that helped me improve my teaching."

Teacher retention has long been a concern of our profession. In this survey, 71% of the novices interviewed agreed strongly - or somewhat - that their mentors "had increased their enthusiasm for teaching and motivated them to stick with it."

Seventy-six (76%) percent of novices agreed that the first year "would have been more difficult without their mentor's assistance."

Finally, when we asked novices to rate the quality of the support they received from their mentors, 73% rated it as "very high" or "high".

From focus groups with 20 beginning teachers we garnered three significant details which support and enrich the quantitative findings:

First, and not surprisingly, emotional and moral support were at the top of the list as the most valuable assistance given to beginners by mentors. In addition, mentors served their novices as confidantes and supporters. Finally, the long experience and wealth of knowledge of their mentors was viewed as a "real plus" for most novices. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of mentors, incidentally, had 14 or more years of teaching experience. In fact, 31% had between 20 and 29 years of teaching experience!

A third source of data was obtained when field staff members interviewed thirty randomly selected mentors and their beginning teachers, in separate conversations. We gained additional descriptions of perceived benefits from these interviews. (I should point out that we had no structured questions as the basis of these interviews. Our purposes at the time were to provide moral support for the new practitioners and to be available for problem-solving if teachers requested it. We did, in every case, take copious notes of our conversations.)

What follows is a summary of patterns that evolved in these interviews:

First, the major benefit perceived by novices is that an assigned mentor is someone to talk to and provide support. "There were so many things I didn't know," more than one novice said. "I didn't know what questions to ask!"

Being observed frequently, as well as observing veteran teachers frequently enabled novices to learn techniques for interacting with students, organizing lessons, and obtaining and developing new materials. It is important to remember that the role of mentors is to assist and not evaluate, which may account for the receptivity to frequent observations that novices commented on.

According to novices, mentors provided them with a sounding board for teaching plans as well as for school politics. The safety of a confidential relationship, in other words, was widely perceived as a valuable aspect of the program.

More details about the assets of the program perceived by novices were provided in the following comments offered by more than half of the novices visited: mentors provide guidance in teaching methods, problem-solving, and general supervision. Often, novices reported, mentors were the only source of these kinds of assistance in their schools.

These reports and figures from new teachers speak positively about Connecticut's induction program. An unanticipated outcome, however, is the extent to which the mentors themselves perceive benefits from playing this new role.

Mentors, too, were questioned by telephone. (See Figure 3) Six questions about how mentors perceived the value of playing the mentor role were asked in this survey. A key question they were asked was about their perceptions of the impact of this induction program on themselves. Forty percent, (40%) indicated that the program had "a great deal" of impact, and 49% cited "somewhat" of an impact.

Increased opportunities for professional growth, beyond those opportunities ordinarily available, were cited as a benefit of the mentor program by 90% of the respondents. A safe assumption, I believe,

is that the training, which encourages teachers to become analytical and reflective about teaching, as well as to investigate the components of the specific attributes and indicators of good teaching, is the growth veteran teachers have in mind in responding to this survey question.

Related responses about perceived mentor benefits were elicited; all of them are more global than specific. For example, 86% of mentors said that this new role had increased the level of interaction they have with other professionals in their field. Ninety-one percent (91%) of surveyed mentors indicated they have a sense of having an impact on the teaching profession. Eighty-five percent (85%) feel that mentoring has increased their sense of feeling respected as professionals. Finally, sixty-three percent (63%) of the respondents indicate they have used their expertise as mentors for professional activities outside of the mentor role.

Mentors were invited to participate in focus groups with other mentors. Twenty-three participated. From these conversations, the researcher collected useful qualitative findings.

Two stand out: personal growth and satisfaction were major positive outcomes cited repeatedly by mentors when describing the results of mentoring. And, for many, keeping logs as a history of the growth of a first-year teacher and the interactions and interventions with that teacher were cited by numerous mentors as benefits of the program.

When the field staff visited mentors in their schools, we recorded their comments about the program in detail. The patterns we discovered include the following:

"I rethink what I do, what is (or will be) my approach to the things I'm teaching."

Being able to work with a new teacher who has fresh ideas and enthusiasm for this work (of teaching) is a common response to the experience.

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A common refrain from veteran teachers is echoed here: "I've become a better teacher, more aware of what makes me do what I do: reviewing, reflecting, and changing."

One of the objectives of Connecticut's induction program is to prepare novices for the assessment process leading to certification. When novices were asked to what extent the assessment process helped them to improve their own teaching, 60% of those questioned answered "a great deal" or "somewhat". Who helped novices most in preparing for that assessment process? Sixty percent, (60%) indicated it was their mentor.

Final assessment figures compiled at the end of our focus year show that 87% of those novices who completed the assessment process succeeded in meeting the Department of Education's standards, 12% partially succeeded and were continued into a second year of support and assessment. In fact, only 1% failed to meet the standard!

The relationship between support and assessment outcomes needs further examination, I believe. But the data collected thus far implies a strong cause and effect possibility.

We still have unanswered questions in this evolving Connecticut program. For example, when mentors and novices talk about a "real difference" they feel because of program participation, what criteria are they using? Are they developing more innovative lessons that lead more students to active inquiry? Are they feeling happier or more secure in their day-to-day routines than previously? We need to pose some specific questions to probe their thinking about instruction, classroom management and personal impact.

In addition, what evidence can we obtain about the nature and quality of the mentors' impact on the profession? How does one conclude that he/she has had an impact on the profession?

Mentors frequently refer to the positive experience of interacting with

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other professionals. I believe we could profit in program development if we did some research on the specific components and characteristics of those interactions.

Finally, we could gather some data on exactly how mentors are using their "mentor expertise" elsewhere. We have a new resource now, in the cadre of experienced mentors, that we want to capitalize on. How can we do it? What can they offer?

There are even larger questions we are motivated to pursue. I would like to suggest three. First, our program demonstrates teacher collegiality far beyond usual faculty interactions. Educators such as Judith Warren-Little and Roland Barth point to the central role of collegiality in developing substantive restructuring of schools. What restructuring potential is implicit through the built-in collegiality of any systematic mentoring program?

Second, how is one's commitment to teaching influenced by participation in a mentoring program? Are novices less likely to join the ranks of attrition in year one or two when supported morally and instructionally? More importantly, will their commitment last beyond the apparently critical five-year period? Will the very best new teachers be retained because of first-year mentoring?

Finally, what is the impact of a mentoring program on students? Are students more motivated? Are they instructed better by new teachers who have mentors? Are their attitudes toward teachers, learning and schooling influenced at all? Clearly there is rich ore to be mined from this field.

For now, as we look at the results of Connecticut's induction program, we can infer that the quality and value of first-year teaching in the state has been improved as a result of intensive, ongoing support by mentors. We base our conclusion on compelling first-hand evidence from novices who believe they benefit from the assistance of trained mentors. Equally important, we now have convincing evidence that the quality and value of teaching by veteran teachers trained and serving as mentors have improved.

The benefits to our profession from having revitalized, reenergized committed teachers who work systematically in guiding novices through the exigencies and vagaries of our overwhelming profession are potentially extensive. In this paper, the major focus has been on feelings, subjective perceptions, and experiential interpretations by the participants themselves. I want to leave you with two personal statements written by mentors to future mentors:

> "The benefits of being a mentor are many. It is a way for you to model the professional status you want for every teacher. It is a chance to 'pay back' the excellence of your own training — to hand it down to the next generation of teachers as a precious legacy. It is a way to give a person what they never get in teacher-training institutions. It is a way to be a supportive help to someone who's going to be responsible for our future leaders' education, which we want to be of high quality. Best of all, it is a great learning experience! It's somewhat like what happens when you become a spouse or a parent for the first time. You find things in yourself you didn't know were there. You should learn as much from your mentee as he/she learns from you."

Here is a final excerpt from a mentor letter:

> "While a mentor certainly has a vast wealth to share with a beginning teacher, you cannot diminish the value and importance of what the beginning teacher has to share with you. Encourage that open dialogue...you will both grow and benefit from it.

> In many ways you will be a lifeline for your beginning teacher this year...an interpreter of district double-talk, confusing forms, and a sympathetic ear, an advisor on everything from how to write lesson plans that don't require spending six hours per night but still satisfy picky administrators, to dealing with severely troubled students in the class. It won't be easy by any means, but it may be one of the most rewarding tasks you will ever undertake. Good luck to you both!"

The pattern is clear. There are mutual benefits for participants. How can we doubt that the teaching profession itself can profit from a systematic, structured induction program that brings these results?

BEST TEACHERS IN TELEPHONE SURVEY

The mentor has made a real difference in:

- my becoming a more competent teacher
- my adjustment to teaching
- providing me with clear, constructive feedback that helped improve my teaching
- my enthusiasm for teaching

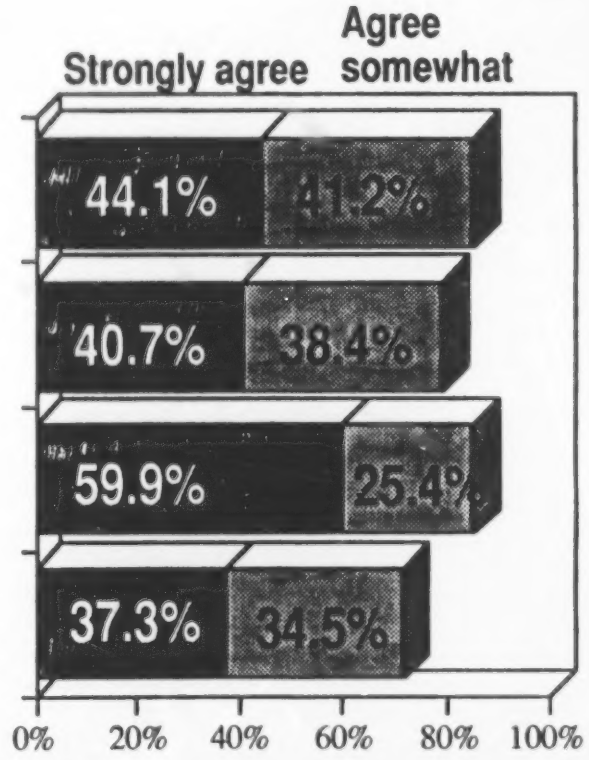

FIGURE 1

BEST TEACHERS IN TELEPHONE SURVEY

- First year would be more difficult without mentor
- Quality of support was "high" or "very high"

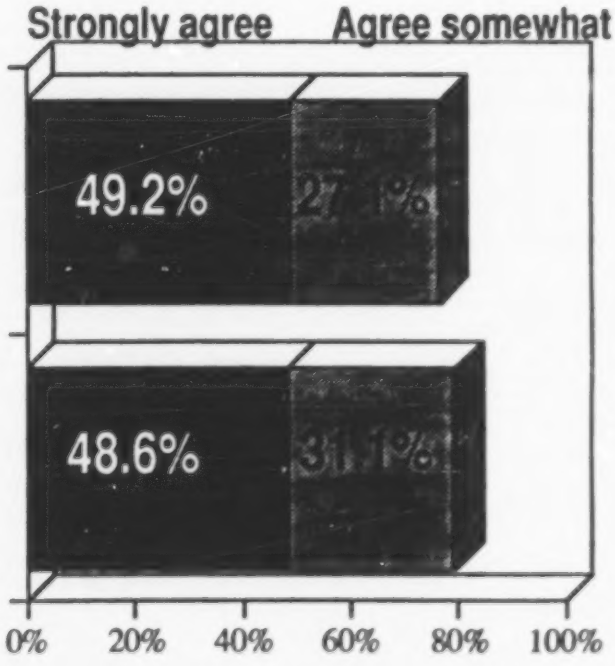

FIGURE 2

MENTORS IN TELEPHONE SURVEY

- Impact on myself
- Opportunities for prof. growth
- Increased inter-action w/ other ed. professionals
- Impact on the profession
- Sense of feeling respected
- Will use new expertise elsewhere

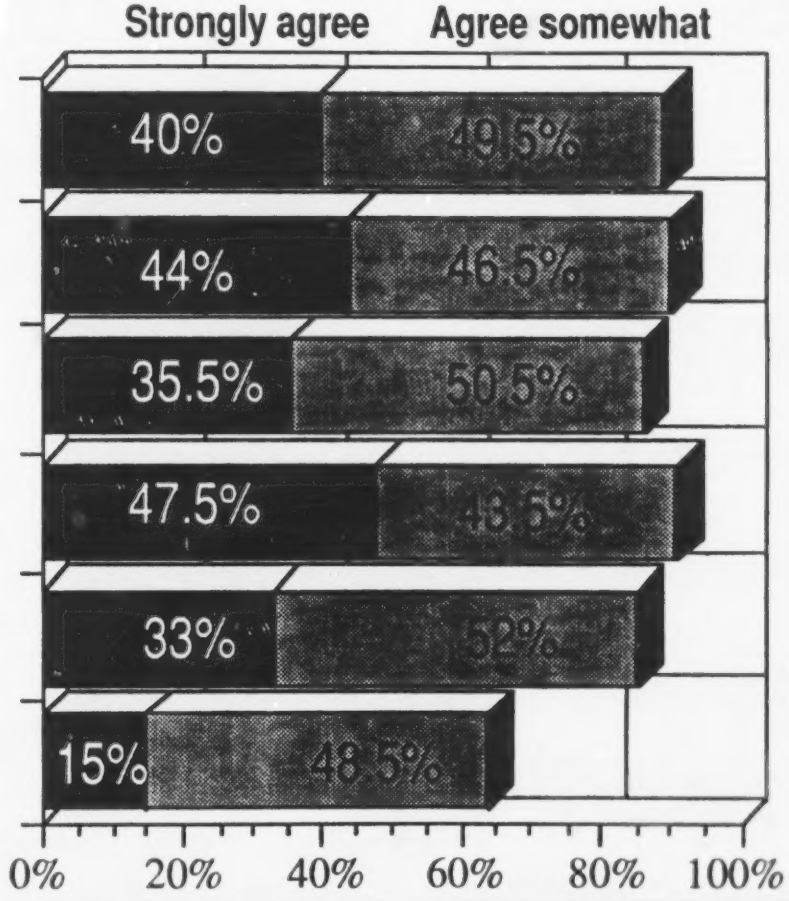

FIGURE 3

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